

**PERSPECTIVE ON NORTHERN NIGERIAN LITERATURE  
IN THE PRECOLONIAL ERA**

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***Abstract***

*The basic approach in this essay on Northern Nigerian Literature in the Pre colonial period begins with an exploration of traditional Hausa oral literary forms. The paper further examines the nature and preoccupation of literary expressions which arose with the advent of Islam in Hausaland. Right from the pre colonial period, Islamic literary works were responses to the great historical and social events. The writers were content to occupy themselves in scholarly pursuits, which their literacy made possible for them and which were nourished by the flow of Islamic literature into Sudan along the caravan routes of the Sahara. Through this literary art the indigenous literary expression were significantly modified.*

***Key Words: Northern Nigerian literature, pre-colonial era, Jihad, Hausa, Arabic, Islamic literature...***

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### Introduction

In spite of the remarkable works of oral historians and Islamic scholars in Northern Nigeria during the pre-colonial era, it was widely assumed that the region had no history, that nothing of any great importance had happened until the invasions of the colonial imperialists and subsequent institutionalization of western forms of learning. Northern Nigeria is used in a loose term to capture the geographical spread of the Sokoto caliphate, Borno and the middle belt. The paper took for granted the existence of a geopolity called Northern Nigeria, and by implication, its reflector, the Northern Nigerian literature. No doubt, there are differences in temporal, economic and political structures among the divergent ethnic groups in the North.

Northern Nigeria is a multi cultural, multi ethnic and multi linguistic entity, but there are strong cohesive and unifying features that bound the region together. Obafemi (2005) observes rightly that “geo-ethnic pluralism has never been an insurmountable barrier to national universalism”<sup>1</sup>. Having delineated the geographical confine of the North, the study of Northern Nigerian literary works before colonialism has shown to the point where our knowledge of significant change in Northern Nigeria extends back to many centuries. Irele (2009) observes rightly that:

The Arab presence in North Africa led to the early introduction of Islam to population in Africa South of the Sahara and has ensured sustained interactions between the two areas for a good part of the past millennium. The Koran has thus served for a much longer period than the Bible as a reference text for the protocol of writing and the formation of the literary sensibility in Africa.<sup>2</sup>

Much of the discussion in this paper related to the cultural forms from precisely the heartland of the areas that could be regarded, historically and politically as Northern Nigeria. The essay begins with an overview of the nature of oral art forms in Northern Nigeria during the precolonial era. It then proceeds to highlight the series of transformations brought to the indigenous folk literature as a result of Islamic movement, the entrenchment of Arabic literature of the reform era, the post-jihad Islamic verse as well as the Islamic tradition of political and social protest. We shall now focus on each of these with the intention of identifying the characteristics and dominant artists.

Tradition oral forms literarily refer to the heritage imaginative verbal creations such as Myths, legends, stories, folk beliefs, ballads and songs of the pre-Islamic Northern Nigerian societies which were developed and passed from one generation to another through the spoken words. The folk literature had the aesthetic efficacy and didactic value that inherently evolved from the cultural tradition of the pre-literate communities. The bulk of creative arts which emanated from various societies of the pre-Islamic North were for social entertainment and for dealing with socio-historical ethos. In traditional communities of the North, oral art forms performed the social value of affirmation and validation of spiritual reality and experiences as observed in other parts of Africa. It functioned as a medium of expressing socio-philosophical view, a source of historical documentation as well as a means of moral, educational, pedagogical and social development (Akporobaro: 2006)<sup>3</sup>.

The oral art forms spread across the generic corpus of traditional drama, sung expression and stories. The concept of performance emanated from the Hausa term known as *Wasannin Gargajiga* meaning the performing arts of the theatre. This concept relates to the Hausa customs and tradition (Kofoworola 1985)<sup>4</sup>. It equally denotes the dramatic performance developed from popular oral tradition. Akporobaro (2006) observes clearly that the mythic imagination which actually generated folktales and lyric poetry also inspired divergent formations of dramatic expressions. These art forms are basically in the forms of ritual performances associated with religious beliefs and socio-historical events. The performance aesthetic forms like song, dance, religious-relief and history intermingled

as artistic resources and socio-logical formations that are peculiar to the society where the dramatic art is taking place<sup>5</sup>.

Traditional Hausa drama was purposive and objective inclined. For instance, *Turu* dance was meant to entertain the royal household. It was normally staged for performance during the coronation of a new king (Sarki). Apart from the conventional royal court performance, a domestic form of drama also exist, it is called *Kidan Ruwa*. The audience was usually composed of women in purdah young girls, maids and women visitors. The performance was usually in an open space within a compound. The major importance of *Kidan Ruwa* drama was to entertain women folk during marriage or naming ceremonies.

The occupational form of theatrical performance closely associated with established trades and crafts was popular among the Hausas. *Wasan Marhaba* was peculiar with hunters, while *Rawar para* belongs to traditional butchers. The same applied to *Wasan Makera* known among the blacksmiths. In *Wasan makera*, *Dundufa* music would be rendered to accomplish the dramatic display.<sup>6</sup>

The precolonial Northern Nigerian communities were reputable for dramatic performances that took place for religious and political purposes. One of the most notable pre-Islamic ceremonial dramas is known as *Farautar Ruwa* which was a form of ritual performance. Another form was *Wasan su* popularly known among the fishing community of the Kebbawa people in Sokoto but now modified as *Arugungu* Fishing festival in Kebbi. There were social forms of drama commonly associated with the youths. These were *Yawon magi* among the Kano people and *Kalankuwa* in Sokoto. These dramatic performances were usually performed to signify the end of rainy season.<sup>7</sup>

Another remarkable dramatic performance for ceremonial and social entertainment was *Tashe*. This drama was usually performed on special occasions. *Goge* music and dance was for both a social purpose and *bori* ritual. There was *Kalanga* music closely associated with *Mahauta* occupational groups. Mamma Shatta, the renowned music legendary and poet developed the melodic rhythm of his dramatic songs from *Kalanga* music. In the pre-Islamic era, *bori* performance was well known. It was essentially a ritualistic performance

for healing purpose. The spirit procession was an integral part of *bori*<sup>8</sup>. According to Obafemi (2006):

The Hausa Bori culture, dance and spirit medium ship mimetic art, is an example of the transposition of a mytho -formal and ritual art into an apparatus of social change in contemporary society. Central to Bori is possession and the intractable transition between art and belief trance. A Bori prototype integrates costume, impersonation, at the height of verisimilitude, symbolism, kinesis (dance movements) and apocalypse. An essentially female performance, Bori takes different events, units of action and themes in its stride-whether Boringida (crisis specific in its marital realm) marriage, illness, death, birth, ceremonial quibbles, divorce and so on. The extant Bori cults is pre-Islamic but there are post-Islamic manifestations, which still inhere the metaphysics as well as the dramatic provenance of the Bori trance/possession cult<sup>9</sup>.

Kofoworola (1985) provides a rich classification of traditional Hausa drama based on the modes of performance. They include simple enactment like royal court, ritual enactment such as *bori*, story telling performances, enactment of the spirit cult, masquerade performance, ceremonial performance and comedies among others.<sup>10</sup>

The oral poetry like the traditional drama can be classified according to social purpose. Sung expressions include ballads and songs, recitations and chants, orations, proverbs, nuptial poetry, occupational poetry, funeral oratory and songs. Don Scharfe and Yahaya Aliyu (1964) in their "Hausa poetry" quoting from Mugo park's  votaries of the muses reveal that the poets in Hausaland:

Consist of two classes; the most numerous are the singing men called Jilli Kea... one or more of these may be found in every town. They sing extempore songs, in honour of their chief, men or any persons who are willing to give 'solid pudding' for empty praise. A notable part of their office is to recite historical events of their country. The other classes are devotees of the Mohomedan faith, who travel about the country, singing devout hymns and performing religious ceremonies, to conciliate the favour of the Almighty either in averting calamity or insuring success to any enterprise. Both description of these itinerant bards are much more employed and respected by the people, and very liberal contributions are made for them.<sup>11</sup>

These two classes of oral poetry still exist in Hausaland. Traditional folktales are myths, legends, fable, mysticism, ethological tales, superstition, fairy tales and epic narratives. These generic forms constitute the literary traditions and accomplishment of precolonial oral art forms in Northern Nigeria. They represent a manifestation of traditional creative imagination, beliefs and perception of socio-cultural reality. They are modes which construct and deconstruct the social-cultural milieu of the people. The collection of oral compositions, recitations and performances of high artistic value were products of the creative use of imagination in pre-literate Northern Nigerian communities. The traditional oral arts were mentally composed by illiterate raconteurs, stored in the memory and then spoken, recited, chanted or sung on specific occasions. Obafemi (2006) provides the distinct literary productivity that defines the essential literature of Northern Nigeria. He enumerates:

The classical Ibwa war dance of Southern Kaduna, which itself, is a stereotyped ritual celebration of the African pantheon embellished in magical outfits.

The Yan Bori, Yan Tauri performance and dance procession in which man becomes vehicle of primordial ritualism.

The Kaduna Boku and the Nizamb Ambwei masquerades, which like their counterparts among the Nupes, the Igbiras and the Yorubas (Okun) are ritualistic performance of repressive social import.

The hegemonic Durbar through which the colonialists develop their administrative structures and hierarchies via the emirate system.

The Ofosi Imole cult of possession in almost all the parts of Okunland.

The quaint Fulani Sharo, an initiation into adulthood performance involving stunning and merciless flogging.

The Okun Yoruba masquerade ensembles, especially the Okura in Bunu and the Egungun-Ala among others.

The Tiv's Kwagh-Hir in Benue with animation of puppets and masquerades<sup>12</sup>.

Literature in Northern Nigeria took a dramatic turn with the penetration of Islam into Hausaland as far back as the fourteenth century. Hausa Islamic verse arose partly as a protest to the indigenous oral tradition already established in the area. Hisket (1975)

gives a historical foundation of Islamic reform tradition in Hausaland. He maintains that the migration of Muslims scholars from North Africa, particularly Muhammed B. Abdu al-Karim al-Maghili (d. 1564)" who taught in Kano and Katsina marked the entrenchment of Arabic literacy in the North.<sup>13</sup> These early groups of Islamic scholars lived in the midst of preliterate animist individuals though clerics were often seen close to the courts of local rulers. The Muslim scholars were content to engage themselves in scholarly pursuit, which their Arabic literacy made possible. They were motivated by the flow of the Islamic into the Sudan along the caravan route of the Sahara. Within a given period, they began to compose Arabic literary expressions. This development led to the emergency of indigenous Islamic literature in classical Arabic in the Hausa kingdoms. With the advent of classical Arabic literature, the local culture began to change though the movement did not produce mass conversion or significantly modify the indigenous folk-literature.<sup>14</sup>

At the end of eighteenth century, a radical group of reformers emerged. They were led by the Shehu Usuman dan Fodio, who deliberately attempted to change the society from one in which Islam had no firm foundation. The group mounted aggressive revolution that reformed the moral, social and political life of the North. This revolution marked the epoch of Arabic literature of the reform movement. Earlier before the Jihadist movement, Islam had entrenched a new form of civilization and cultural oriental achievements such as the art of reading and writing as a vehicle for promoting the propagation of Islamic religion. The first major step towards the mastery of Koran is Koranic school (*Makarantun allo*) while the second involves the attainment of specialization in various branches of knowledge as jurisprudence, theology, syntax, logic, law prosody and the sciences of astrology and mathematic through ilmi school (*Makarantun ilmi*)<sup>15</sup>.

Since Arabic is the medium of instruction and all available books were in Arabic, the earlier scholars in Hausaland started to write texts in the language and even composed poems. Again scholars in Hausaland wrote books in Arabic. Prominent among them were scholars such as Abdullahi Suka of Kano who wrote *Riwayar Annabi Musa*, *Wali Dan Marina* of Katsina whose texts comprised of poems in Arabic, and *Wali Danmasani* also of Katsina

who wrote several publications on syntax and jurisprudence in Arabic Graham (1996) remarks that:

After the arrival of Islam in the fourteenth century, a class of Islamic clerics emerged in the major Northern cities whose activities had a lasting influence upon the direction of state administration and upon popular adherence to Islam. The pre-existing indigenous religion involving spirit possession *bori*, came under strong pressure from the new religion adopted at the centre ... *Bori* in the cities became relegated to the social margins.<sup>16</sup>

The most remarkable movement in the Hausa literature came with the advent of Islamic revolution. The Jihad period brought about a tremendous intellectual awakening which precipitated an unprecedented outpouring of scholarly written works from prominent scholars and itinerant preachers. Yahaya Ibrahim Yaro in his popular essay entitled "The Development of Hausa literature" states that:

Shehu Usman bn Fodio alone composed about 480 poems in Arabic, Fulfulde and Hausa, not to mention the books he wrote in Arabic. Out of this number, some 25 poems are composed by him in either Arabic or Fulfulde and later translated in similar poetic form into Hausa. The Jihad poems in Hausa (Ajami) are more than 100 by the Shehu and his disciples and followers, prominent among whom were his daughter Nana Asma'u (17 poems) his brother, Shehu Abdullahi Fodio (8 poems) and his son, Isan Kware (17 poems), Saidu Dan Bello (3 poems), Dikko dan Bagine (2 poems), Maryamu Yar Shehu (3 poems), Khalil dan Abdullahi (2 poems) and many other scholars who composed Hausa poems in addition to their other works in Arabic and Fulfulde.<sup>15</sup>

Falola remarks that Jihad in Northern Nigeria inevitably witnessed a monumental outburst of literary works. The literary materials that were well known include interesting poems, religions debates on the nature of the state, state and religion, state and economy, religion tracts, didactic stories and detailed analysis of contemporary events. The Jihadist's traditional scholarship came as a result of their radical intellectualism. The leading touch bearers of the Jihad were educated men who belonged to *Qadiriyyah* movement which emphasized the acquisition of knowledge. In view of the movement's formidable intellectual inclination, the nineteenth century northern Nigeria witnessed a remarkable upsurge of literary works in forms of books, pamphlets, letters, poems and many

manuscripts. These materials provided a philosophical and theological framework for the Jihad movement.<sup>16</sup> Obafemi remarks that:

The Sokoto Jihad compelled the interact play of socio-cultural and socio-economic factors to produce a vibrant literary culture in Northern Nigeria. The Ulama produced enormous volumes of literature in Arabic-Arabic poetry and prose in the early periods of the nineteenth century. Uthman Dan Fodio and his son, Mohammad Bello, who ruled between (1817-1837w) were said to be outstanding scholars who inspired and encouraged the flourish of literary productivity. (13).

The post-Jihad Hausa Islamic literature flourished as soon the revolution was over. Hausa peasants were still animist and the nominal adherence to Islam of the chiefs and courtiers made no significant difference to the life of the people. The revolutionary movement only succeeded in merely substituting new rulers for old. The reformers therefore assumed a novel responsibility of imposing an Islamic moral and political ideal upon the populace firmly entrenched in traditional African custom and beliefs. The poetry thus continued its role of an ideological weapon of radical reformation. It also became the mouth piece for the Islamic polity that the reformers were attempting to establish.

Poetry of the post-Jihad Hausa communities was equally an instrument of protest against the bad practices of the rulers, especially the corruption that grew out of political power. The priests and scholars, who remained outside the Fulani dynasty, started composing Hausa verse to attack the dictatorial attitude of the Fulani rulers. In this way, Hausa poetry became a permanent institution of creative art sustained by powerful political motives, and by a continuing sentiment of Islamic radicalism. The growth of Islam witnessed the offshoot of a local Islamic literature. The Fulani reformers, geared by a poignant hostility towards all the manifestations of Hausa indigenous culture, especially the secular song tradition, came up with the idea of using Islamic verse composed in Hausa for missionary purposes.<sup>17</sup> Written Arabic verse began to flourish in local languages and Arabic. The reforms and new supporters as well as their opponents continued to use poetry to express their response to the social, political and religious affairs set on course by the Jihad movement. The Fulani reformers who were familiar with ideal Islamic culture acquired through training in the religious science wrote Hausa poetry in the standard form

of Arabic literature of Islam. The style, imagery and ideas were part of their intellectual experience borrowed from the classical language of Arabic into Hausa. In this way, they used familiar Arabic terms. Their literature thus conformed to an Islamic pattern. Poets who composed these verses were conditioned by their orientation in Islamic view of life.

This political and social protest literature of the pre-colonial period in Northern Nigeria sprang up to serve ideological purpose. Like any society in history, Islam had its puritans. It also had its tyrants and selfish materialists among the rulers. The gap between the privileged and the under privileged in the emerging Islamic societies of the North became a source of concern to many puritan poets. Their poems therefore became a weapon of protest against the new social and political inequality which was contrary to the imperatives of divine revolution. This Islamic political radicalism sprang from the creative sensibilities of men who saw power and wealth as bait for inducing corruption.

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